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THE JEWS OF ARABIA AND THE GAONATE

It is generally assumed that the Jews of Arabia were totally expelled from that country in the beginning of Islam: the Banū Ẓainuḳā' and the Banū Nāḍir, numbering together about 1300, by Muhammed (Grätz, V³, 99. 100) and the bulk of Arabian Jews in Khaibar and the neighboring settlements by 'Omar (ruled 634-644). "So great, says Grätz (V³, 108; English translation III, 84), was the fanaticism of the second caliph 'Omar, a man of a wild and energetic nature, that he broke the treaty made by Muhammed with the Jews of Khaibar and Wādī'l-Ḳura. He drove them from their lands, as he did also the Christians of Najrān, in order that the holy ground of Arabia might not be desecrated by Jews and Christians. 'Omar assigned the landed property of the Jews to the Muhammedan warriors and a strip of land near the town of Kufa on the Euphrates was—with a certain measure of justice—given them in return (about 640)."¹ This is also the opinion of Hirschfeld who has given much attention to the history of the Jews in Arabia. He says (*JE.*, II, 43*b*, article "Arabia"): " 'Omar, however, drove them out of the country and they left for Syria" (cf. also *JE.*, VII, 481*a*). This verdict has often been repeated and has even passed for "a matter of history" (cf. Marcus N. Adler, *The Itinerary*

¹ Also the fourth edition of the fifth volume of Grätz' *History* which has just appeared and has been carefully revised by Eppenstein leaves the above statement untouched.

of *Benjamin of Tudela*, 46, note 4). Despite this consensus of opinion, the supposition that the Jews were wholly driven out from Arabia is unfounded. The expulsion of the Jews by 'Omar is ascribed by the Muhammedan historians (so by Ibn Hishām, ed. Wüstenfeld, 779, and others) to the fact that 'Omar who at first had left the Jews unmolested received the information that Muhammed had declared on his deathbed: "No two religions shall exist together on the Arabian peninsula". This utterance of Muhammed was accepted as genuine by many Muhammedan theologians (see Goldziher, *REJ.*, XXIX, 75, note 3; comp. Gottheil, "Dhimmis and Moslems in Egypt", in: *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of William Rainey Harper*, II, 353, note 2). It was, however, pointed out by Caetani in his monumental work *Annali dell' Islam*, II 1, 507, that this tradition rather reflects the intolerant spirit of the second or third Muhammedan century and is refuted by the fact that the famous church of Ṣan'ā in Yemen was still tolerated in the time of the second 'Abbasid caliph Maṣṣūr (754-775) and that Wādī 'l-Ḳura is still spoken of as a Jewish settlement under 'Abdalmalik (685-705; comp. Caetani, *ibid.*, II, 50, note 7). But whatever the genuineness of the tradition, we have the unequivocal testimony of the early Arabic historian Wākīdī (died 823 C. E.) that not all Jews were expelled from Arabia. He declares expressly (Wellhausen, *Muhammed in Medina*, Berlin 1882, 292; for other quotations see Caetani, *l. c.*, II, 50): "'Omar expelled the Jews from Khaibar and Fadak, but allowed them to remain in Wādī 'l-Ḳura and Taimā, because Wādī 'l-Ḳura still belonged to *Shā'm* (Syria), while (the Arabian province) Hijāz began to the south of it." Khaibar was four days' journey from Medina. Wādī 'l-Ḳura lay nearby

to the east of Khaibar. Fadak and Taimā lay more north (see the splendid map of Jewish settlements in Caetani's work, II 1, opposite p. 376). The fact that Fadak, which lay more north than Wādi 'l-Ḳura and must officially have belonged to Syria, was one of the places from which the Jews were expelled shows that 'Omar's action was not prompted by the apocryphal utterance of the dying Prophet.

However this may be, it is a most fortunate coincidence that the two places—Wādi'l-Ḳura and Taimā—in which the Jews, according to Wākidī, were allowed to remain, should figure as Jewish settlements in later Jewish sources. In an old index of Gaonic responsa published by Ginzberg (*Geonica*, II, 54 ff.) occurs the following entry: אלדרג אלסאדם שאלות בני ואדי אלקרי לרבנו שרירא נאון והאיי אב ז"ל. Unfortunately of this "sixth bundle" only the reference to the first responsum is preserved, but it no doubt contained numerous such "questions". A similar entry is found in the Gaonic responsa published by Harkavy, p. 94: אלו השאלות ששאלו בני ואדי אלקרי מלפני אדוני שרירא ראש הישיבה זצ"ל ואב ז"ל. The two entries most probably refer to the same collection, for the first responsum, of which only the question is preserved, is identical in Harkavy's and Ginzberg's text. It is characteristic that this responsum deals with agriculture, and it is perhaps not accidental that the Talmudic passage (Baba Bathra 82a) on which the question hinges discusses the applicability of the Mishnaic law to palm-trees. For the Jews of these Arabian settlements were, as we know, engaged in agriculture and especially in the cultivation of palms. Harkavy's text has also preserved the answers of two more responsa dealing with the law of inheritance.

Taimā as a Jewish settlement is mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela (ed. M. N. Adler, London 1907, Hebrew

text, p. 46 f.). It is described by Benjamin as the capital of a large country in which the Jews lead an independent life. The land is governed by two brothers—Salmōn and Ḥānān—princes of Davidic descent—“*who dispatch many questions to the exilarch—their kinsman—in Bagdad.*” Whatever exaggerations there may attach to Benjamin’s account of the Arabian Jews which is obviously founded on hearsay (cf. Adler, *ibid.* p. 48, n. 2), the main and most important fact—the existence of Jews on the Arabian peninsula many centuries after their supposed total expulsion from that country—cannot be doubted. It is characteristic of the central position of the Gaonate in Jewish life that even in its last representatives it was able to exert its influence over the distant half-mythical Jews in free Arabia and shape their professional and civil life. It shows at the same time that the Arabian Jews, however far removed from the center of Jewish learning, recognized the authority of the Talmud and were not in any way guilty of those anti-Talmudic sentiments which Grätz is prone to ascribe to their forefathers.²

THE JEWS OF ARABIA AND THE RECHABITES

In connection with the foregoing remarks a word may be said about the designation of Arabian Jews as Rechabites, the descendants of Jonadab ben Rechab (Jerem. 35). Benjamin of Tudela, in his account of the Jews of Taimā, quoted in the preceding notice, describes them, according to the text of the current editions, as היהודים [הנקראים] בני רכב אנשי הימא (see ed. Grünhut, p. 64, l. 4, and variants,

² See above, p. 209 ff.